Evidence of Popular Disaffection and Grassroots Opposition to the CCP Regime

I. Executive Summary: The Crisis of Concealed Legitimacy

Analysis of contemporary Chinese society reveals that popular opposition to and disaffection with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime is substantially greater and more pervasive than indicated by state-controlled narratives and direct public opinion polls. The evidence demonstrates a dual spectrum of dissent. On one hand, there is a constant, high-frequency baseline of localized, instrumental dissent focused on socio-economic grievances such as land disputes, environmental issues, and labor rights.[1] On the other hand, there are low-frequency, high-impact systemic challenges that directly target the central leadership and ideological mandate of the CCP, exemplified by the 2022 nationwide protests.[2]

The central threat to the regime's perceived stability does not stem from the volume of localized incidents, which are generally managed through repression and policy concession.[1] Rather, the critical risk lies in the vast, volatile reservoir of **concealed opposition**. Empirical evidence suggests that opposition is constrained primarily by a pervasive fear of repression, a factor that affects participation in anti-regime activity for nearly 40% of the populace.[4] This reliance on coercion, rather than genuine popular consent, introduces structural fragility. When the state's coercive apparatus momentarily fails, or when a crisis bridges economic hardship with political incompetence, this concealed disaffection can transition rapidly into unpredictable, large-scale political mobilization, as observed during the A4 Revolution and the collective mortgage boycotts.[2]

II. Theoretical Framework: Assessing Dissent in the Authoritarian State

The Authoritarian Constraint on Political Measurement

Studying genuine political sentiment in a centralized authoritarian state presents profound methodological challenges. Under the leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping, the regime has intensified surveillance and deployed legalistic repression to actively suppress political expression and distort reliable measures of public opinion.[6] The consequence is a political environment defined by opacity, where citizens strategically hide their true beliefs, making conventional polling data unreliable for assessing regime legitimacy.

The Spectrum of Dissent

To accurately evaluate the evidence of popular disaffection, it is necessary to establish a clear typology of resistance. Dissent in the People's Republic of China (PRC) can be categorized along a spectrum:

1. **Instrumental Dissent:** This refers to protests aimed at achieving specific, localized policy adjustments or redress for grievances, typically involving disputes over unpaid wages, compensation for land development, or local environmental and Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) activism.[1] These protests usually target corrupt or incompetent local officials, carefully avoiding direct criticism of the central leadership or the foundational legitimacy of the CCP.
2. **Systemic Dissent:** This form explicitly challenges the ideological monopoly, centralized authority, or fundamental legitimacy of the CCP and its leaders. Events such as the 2022 protests against the zero-COVID policy or the symbolic actions modeled after the Sitong Bridge incident fall into this category, as they challenge the core tenets of deepening authoritarian rule.[2]

The Role of Fear and Preference Falsification

A core concept essential for understanding political risk in China is **preference falsification**. This is defined as the strategic act of misreporting one's true political beliefs—either by expressing support for the regime one secretly opposes or concealing opposition—due to the

perceived high costs of expressing dissent, including social stigma, financial penalty, or criminal repression.[4] Preference falsification ensures outward compliance but builds an unstable political edifice susceptible to sudden shifts, as the hidden opposition remains latent and potentially explosive.

III. The Landscape of Hidden Opposition: Re-Calibrating CCP Support

The CCP routinely relies on the apparent overwhelming popular approval indicated by traditional public opinion research to justify its legitimacy. However, critical evaluation of the methodologies employed reveals a substantial "legitimacy deficit" concealed by widespread fear.

Critical Review of Direct Survey Methodologies

Most public opinion research conducted in China utilizes direct questions to gauge support for the CCP and government policies.[4] These direct questioning methods consistently report extremely high approval ratings, often exceeding 90% of Chinese citizens supporting the government.[4] Scholars relying solely on this data often conclude that the CCP enjoys deep, genuine legitimacy.[9] This methodology, however, is heavily susceptible to social desirability bias and preference falsification in a high-repression environment.

Case Study: Evidence from List Experiments and Anonymity Studies

Empirical findings from two survey experiments conducted in contemporary China—utilizing indirect methodologies such as list experiments—demonstrate that Chinese citizens conceal significant opposition due to fear of state repression.[4] List experiments are designed to confer a greater sense of anonymity to respondents, thereby mitigating the incentive for preference falsification.

The results of these experiments are starkly different from those yielded by direct questions. When measured indirectly, reported support for the CCP drops significantly, hovering

between 50% and 70%.[4] This substantial 20 to 40 percentage point discrepancy between direct and anonymous measurement provides robust empirical evidence quantifying the scale of latent disaffection. This gap represents the "fear premium" the regime extracts to maintain outward compliance, indicating that for a major segment of the populace, compliance is mandated by coercion rather than rooted in genuine consent. Furthermore, researchers caution that even indirect methodologies may not fully eliminate incentives for preference falsification, suggesting that the 50%–70% figure represents an upper bound for genuine support.[4]

These experiments also yield critical data regarding the mechanics of control. The studies suggest that the fear of government repression actively discourages approximately 40% of Chinese citizens from participating in anti-regime protests.[4] This finding reveals that political stability is maintained by a coercive apparatus that effectively suppresses the mobilization capacity of a significant portion of the population. A system resting upon such widespread, yet suppressed, opposition is highly stable only during periods of high repression. However, it is structurally fragile and exceptionally vulnerable to rapid escalation should the coercive apparatus weaken or fail temporarily. The high prevalence of concealed opposition means that grassroots mobilization, once sparked, can scale rapidly and unpredictably, transforming localized outrage into a systemic political challenge within a matter of days.

Table 1 illustrates the critical distinction between official and inferred public support metrics, highlighting the impact of preference falsification.

Table 1: Comparison of CCP Support Metrics (Direct vs. Indirect Measurement)

Methodology	**Reported CCP Approval Rate (Typical Range)**	**Inferred Level of Genuine Opposition**	**Driving Factor for Concealment**
Direct Question Surveys	90% +	< 10% (Stated)	Social Desirability Bias, Public Compliance
Indirect (List) Experiments	50% – 70%	30% – 50% (Inferred)	Fear of Repression, Preference Falsification [4]

IV. Manifestations of Systemic Political Opposition

(2020-Present)

Although state control typically restricts dissent to localized, instrumental grievances, recent years have witnessed rare but highly significant instances where opposition explicitly challenged the core political legitimacy of the CCP.

A. The A4 Revolution and the Zero-COVID Policy Backlash (2022)

The nationwide protests that erupted between November and December 2022, known internationally as the White Paper protests or the A4 Revolution, were triggered by the protracted humanitarian crises imposed by the regime's Zero-COVID policy. They were specifically ignited by the deadly Ürümqi fire.[2]

Crucially, these were not typical protests seeking localized redress; they quickly adopted an overtly political and systemic nature, including opposition directed toward the Chinese Communist Party, General Secretary Xi Jinping, and the overall deepening of authoritarianism in the country.[2] Protests were observed across mainland China and resonated with solidarity demonstrations abroad.[2]

The method of resistance was highly symbolic. Protesters utilized blank white A4 paper, a powerful sign of dissent against the pervasive censorship that silences free expression.[10] The cultural context further amplified the symbolism: white paper is used in Chinese "white events" (funerals), often thrown in funeral processions, linking the protests to vigils for the victims of the Ürümqi fire.[10] This overlapping cultural symbolism fostered intense camaraderie and a shared sense of grievance among participants, encapsulated by the sentiment, "An injury to one is an injury to all." This funeral symbolism transformed the protests into both banners of rebellion and bands of mourning, channeling injustice into collective political action.[10]

The political potency of the A4 Revolution was confirmed by its immediate outcome. The demonstrations were highly effective, leading the government to abruptly abandon its three-year-long Zero-COVID policy—a fundamental ideological mandate—within weeks of the protests.[11] This outcome established a clear causal link: sufficiently coordinated and politically explicit grassroots dissent can compel the central authorities to execute major policy reversals, even when they contradict entrenched political commitments.

The subsequent state reaction reveals the CCP's ultimate calculus. The policy reversal achieved immediate demobilization [2], demonstrating that maintaining political stability and

preventing sustained anti-regime organization takes immediate precedence over adhering to a specific policy line. However, the subsequent, aggressive "erasure of memory" [11] through comprehensive online censorship confirms the regime's recognition of the movement's political danger. This memory erasure is vital to neutralize the movement's potent example and prevent future imitation.

B. Symbolic Acts of Decentralized Resistance

The political landscape changed following the 2022 Beijing Sitong Bridge protest, during which activist Peng Lifa unfurled banners explicitly protesting zero-COVID policies and Xi Jinping.[8] This incident is widely regarded as a turning point, signaling the emergence of overt public opposition within China and sparking a "wave of similar acts of resistance".[8]

The response of activists to the intense crackdown following the A4 Revolution has been one of tactical adaptation. Dissidents shifted to low-cost, decentralized, and harder-to-track methods. Examples include the so-called "Toilet Revolution" (slogans written in public restrooms and university bathrooms to maximize anonymity and bypass digital surveillance).[8] Furthermore, the 2025 Chongqing anti-CCP projection protest demonstrated the persistence of anti-regime sentiment by explicitly targeting CCP rule, state surveillance, and "patriotic education," and directly imitating the Sitong Bridge action.[8] These continuous, low-visibility symbolic acts confirm that the **intention to dissent** is resilient and adapts its form when mass mobilization is curtailed. They represent a persistent, low-grade challenge to the regime's assertion of ideological uniformity.

C. Elite Dissent and Intellectual Alienation

Evidence of disaffection is not limited to the grassroots but extends to the intellectual elite. Prominent academics have issued severe public criticisms, despite the immediate threat of state retaliation. Professor Xu Zhangrun, a respected legal scholar at Tsinghua University, published unsparing critiques, warning against the dangers of one-man rule, the return to totalitarianism, and the political system's moral bankruptcy under Xi Jinping.[12] Xu specifically identified the CCP's management of the COVID-19 outbreak as a "man-made disaster," resulting from the prioritization of internet censorship and political preservation over public health protection.[12]

The regime's response to such criticism is instructive. Xu Zhangrun was demoted, banned

from teaching, and subsequently detained and fired in 2020, often on pretextual charges (e.g., "seeking out prostitutes") used specifically to discredit and criminalize peaceful critics of the ruling party.[14] The explicit targeting and harsh punishment of highly respected legal scholars serves to alienate the educated, professional strata. By aggressively eliminating internal, reformist criticism, the CCP forces opposition into either total silence or outright anti-regime positioning, thereby eroding institutional trust and destabilizing the ideological foundation of state governance among key elites.

V. Economic Disaffection: Protests Driven by Financial Instability

Economic insecurity frequently serves as the most accessible catalyst for mass mobilization in China, as financial grievances often transcend local boundaries due to shared systemic policy failures, providing an avenue for high-impact dissent.

A. The Housing Crisis and Mortgage Boycotts (2022–Ongoing)

The Chinese mortgage boycott represents a significant ongoing mass protest, initiated primarily in response to delayed or completely stalled property development by major firms such as China Evergrande Group.[5] Homebuyers were required to continue paying mortgages on properties that had not been built or had seen no construction progress for extended periods.

This grievance escalated into collective action when homebuyers in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, released a public letter threatening to cease repaying their mortgage loans unless construction resumed.[5] The action rapidly spread across Chinese social media and messaging platforms, allowing citizens to commiserate and share their frustrations with similar perceived mortgage-related injustices. Within approximately one month, sustained mortgage repayment protests were observed in roughly one hundred cities.[5]

The mortgage boycott is significant because it transformed a private contractual dispute into a systemic economic and political crisis. By collectively threatening the solvency of the banking system—a foundational pillar of CCP stability—homebuyers effectively weaponized their debt, acquiring immense leverage over the central government.[5] This form of non-compliance is difficult for the regime to repress through force without triggering a

broader financial collapse. The widespread nature of this crisis confirms the fragility of the CCP's legitimacy, which is heavily predicated on ensuring rising economic prosperity and stable asset accumulation. Failures in high-stakes sectors like real estate force costly government interventions, such as establishing local bailout funds and reducing mortgage costs, to mitigate public outrage.[5]

B. Financial Grievances and Violent Confrontations

Another significant example of economic disaffection occurred during the Henan Rural Bank Protests in 2022. A crowd estimated at over 1,000 protesters gathered in Zhengzhou to demand the recovery of frozen savings.[3] The assembly resulted in a rare, violent confrontation where the protesters were forcefully broken up by unidentified security personnel.[3]

The regime's management of this crisis demonstrated a clear strategy: employ targeted violence while maintaining deniability, immediately followed by policy concession. The use of unidentified personnel [3] allows the central regime to use maximum force while framing the violence as a local issue. Following the confrontation, authorities initially blamed "criminal gangs" for taking control of the banks, but swiftly pivoted, with the provincial banking and insurance regulator announcing accelerated plans to tackle the financial crisis and protect the public's rights.[3] This swift policy reversal—suppressing the physical manifestation of dissent while addressing the core grievance—was designed to prevent the financial outrage from diffusing or escalating into a broader political challenge.

VI. Persistent Localized Grievances: The Baseline of Unrest

Despite high-profile systemic events, the constant background of popular disaffection is represented by the tens of thousands of localized protests—or "mass incidents"—that occur annually across the PRC.[1] These events are widespread geographically and diffused throughout various social groups.[6]

Primary Drivers and Containment Strategy

The primary drivers of this chronic unrest remain overwhelmingly local: disputes over unpaid wages, conflicts concerning compensation for land development, and local environmental activism.[1] These protests generally focus their energy on corrupt or incompetent local officials, carefully avoiding direct criticism of the central CCP authority.[1]

The CCP manages these incidents through a strategic mechanism often referred to as a "safety valve." The regime employs a mixture of surveillance, repression, and concession. Crucially, localized protests frequently result in "at least partial success" for the organizers.[1] Allowing partial success serves two political functions: it keeps the protests localized and prevents the consolidation of regional or sectoral dissent, thereby channeling frustration away from the central authorities. This mechanism effectively contains systemic risk but comes at the cost of sustaining perpetually poor quality local governance, as the populace is structurally forced to rely on extralegal collective action merely to achieve basic rights and redress against corruption.

The consistently high volume of protests documented over the past two decades [1] signals a structural failure in the state's capacity to channel popular frustration into institutionalized, legal forms of grievance resolution, a function typically observed in democratic polities.[6]

Table 2 synthesizes the diverse categories of popular opposition, characterizing the scale and political risk associated with each type of dissent.

Table 2: Key Categories and Drivers of Recent Grassroots Dissent

Category of Dissent	**Primary Driver(s)**	**Scope/Scale**	**Risk Profile to CCP**	**Example Incidents**
Political/Systemic	Opposition to Xi Jinping/Authoritarianism, Ideological Control	National (Symbolic and Coordinated)	High Risk, Targets Central Legitimacy	A4 Revolution, Sitong Bridge Imitations [2]
Economic/Financial	Housing Crisis, Frozen Assets, Systemic Financial Fraud	Regional/National (Sectoral Coordination)	High Risk, Threatens Financial Stability/Social Contract	Mortgage Boycott, Henan Bank Protests [3]

Social/Localized	Environmental issues, Land disputes, Unpaid wages	Local (High Frequency, Diffused)	Low-Medium Risk, Contained by Local Concessions	Tens of thousands of annual mass incidents [1]

VII. The State's Repression and Counter-Dissent Strategy

The CCP's response to dissent is highly strategic, reflecting the regime's acute awareness of the specific types of opposition that pose the greatest risk to its centralized control. The strategy involves a multi-layered approach combining digital control, legalistic targeting, and transnational operations.

A. Digital Censorship and Memory Erasure

Following politically sensitive events, authorities implement rigorous efforts to "erase memory," primarily through immediate, aggressive online censorship. For example, few traces of the White Paper protest movement remain in China as authorities silenced those who attempted to document or commemorate it.[11] Digital control relies on heavy filtering of searches and swift removal of sensitive content.[16]

However, citizens consistently demonstrate persistence and ingenuity in bypassing these controls. During periods of heightened surveillance, users employ acronyms—such as "JC," which stands for *jingcha*, or police in Mandarin—to discuss arrests and sensitive events, illustrating the constant cat-and-mouse game between citizens and censors.[16] This repression accelerates political learning among the populace, fostering a culture of technical ingenuity and organizational secrecy that generates novel forms of resistance (e.g., A4 paper, restroom slogans) [8], ultimately making future mobilization efforts harder for the state to predict and pre-empt.

B. Judicial Targeting and Transnational Repression

The regime utilizes the judicial system not merely for punishment but as a tool for public discredit. High-profile critics, such as Professor Xu Zhangrun, are targeted with vague or pretextual criminal charges—such as "seeking out prostitutes"—to transform political opponents into common criminals, thereby neutralizing their moral authority in the public eye.[15]

Furthermore, the CCP has expanded its coercive reach globally, employing **transnational repression operations** targeting dissidents abroad.[7] These covert operations have triggered investigations by several foreign governments, including the U.S., Australia, and Sweden.[7] The severity of this response is indicated by its consequences: in some instances, targets of espionage ended up imprisoned in China or had family members threatened.[7] The decision to incur the high political and diplomatic cost associated with transnational repression confirms the regime's deep concern that external critiques and organization could penetrate the Great Firewall and fuel internal opposition, especially given the documented high prevalence of concealed opposition domestically.

Table 3 provides a summary analysis of the three major, high-impact dissent events of recent years, highlighting the swift and effective government responses to each.

Table 3: Analysis of Major Dissent Events (2022–2025)

Event Name	Date Range	Primary Grievance Type	Outcome/Significance	CCP Response
White Paper Protests (A4 Revolution)	Nov–Dec 2022	Systemic/Political (Zero-COVID, Authoritarianism) [2]	Government abruptly ended Zero-COVID policy. Rare national, systemic challenge. [11]	Policy Concession + Rapid Censorship/Memory Erasure [11]
Henan Bank Protests	July 2022	Economic/Financial (Frozen rural savings) [3]	Violent suppression by unidentified personnel; authorities	Targeted Violence + Policy Concession [3]

			promised expedited bailout plan.	
Chinese Mortgage Boycott	Ongoing (Started mid-2022)	Economic/Financial (Delayed properties) [5]	Spread across roughly 100 cities, prompted government market intervention (bailouts).	Financial Intervention + Systemic Mitigation [5]
Chongqing Anti-CCP Projection	Pre-2025 Victory Day	Systemic/Political (Anti-CCP Rule, Surveillance) [8]	Symbolic act, imitation of Sitong Bridge incident, testing limits of digital control.	Arrests/Surveillance (Inferred: High Suppression/Low Immediate Policy Concession) [8]

VIII. Conclusion: Assessing the Trajectory and Risk of Popular Disaffection

Popular disaffection in contemporary China is not a marginal issue but a major, structural risk defined by a deep reservoir of concealed opposition and punctuated by highly volatile mobilizations.[2] The evidence strongly suggests that the CCP's reported 90%+ approval rating is artificially inflated by fear, and genuine support likely rests between 50% and 70%—a vulnerability exacerbated by a 40% reluctance rate to participate in dissent.[4]

The CCP's continued capacity to manage this widespread disaffection hinges on two critical functions:

1. **Maintaining the Coercive Apparatus:** The state must continuously enforce the "fear premium" that restrains the mobilization of the populace (the 30%–50% inferred opposition) and project its coercive power globally through transnational repression.[4]
2. **Strategic Policy Differentiation:** The regime must swiftly and accurately distinguish between high-frequency, manageable instrumental dissent (which can be demobilized

with minor, localized policy concessions) [1] and rare, systemic political dissent (which demands immediate repression, massive policy reversal, and permanent memory erasure).[11]

The repeated necessity for the CCP to make massive, abrupt policy reversals (such as the end of Zero-COVID) or costly financial interventions (as seen in the Mortgage Crisis) demonstrates that, despite an unprecedented level of surveillance and centralized control, the regime remains acutely sensitive and vulnerable to coordinated grassroots pressure. This vulnerability is highest when grievances successfully bridge economic failure with centralized political incompetence, allowing latent disaffection to temporarily overcome fear and manifest as high-impact challenges to the regime's authority.

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